

# THE POWER OF FELLOWSHIP

## Part 1 - The Kindness of God

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23 (ESV)



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### NAMING

For the next six weeks we are going to talk about God's purposes in the fellowship of the saints. God could have designed His people to function in this world any way He wanted. But as far back as creation, He made from the dust of the earth a man for whom it was "not good" for him to be alone. He

cut His Covenant with a nation of descendants. After Easter, Christ called His church one body made of many parts, each needing the others. <sup>(1 Cor 12:24-25)</sup> We were made for fellowship.

I love this church—a love that has translated into the forging of deep friendships and into a deep affection I feel as I put words on a page for these times in the pulpit. You have energized me. But I also confess there have been times when my burdens and sorrows have driven that "connecting" part of me underground. I believe there is power in naming things—giving identity and light to things otherwise hidden in shadow, so let me name one of my own fellowship-killing habits here. Feeling at my limit, there have been seasons where I have sought refuge in distance. Perhaps you've noticed this in me—a less than earnest smile, a failure to follow up on that coffee appointment we talked about, a sense that I am living a more reactive than proactive life.

I've operated this way in the past. I operate this way to some degree even now. I will likely operate this way in the future, though I pray for the grace not to. Why? Because I am a sinner who knows as well as you do that relationships are risky, messy, costly endeavors. I know you know this because I watch you seek refuge in distance too. Who are we kidding, right? We live in a culture that is funny about how we mete out our relational availability—as though we only have so much to give, and if we give too much we'll deflate like an old balloon, and then what?

Let me go deeper. I say this with love: I think we are a church that is funny about relational availability. Don't misunderstand me. I believe Oak Hills is a wonderful, solid church. I believe we excel at responding to each other in times of crisis. I've seen it. In crisis, this church will drop what you're doing to help. You'll give. You'll open your homes. I also think we're really good at welcoming new visitors. I hear in every Discovering Oak Hills Class that one thing people find surprising about this church was how welcoming we are. This is good! We're good at crisis and we're good at welcoming strangers. The question of this series is, "Are we good at the stuff in between?" Are we good at fellowship? At friendship? How can we become excellent?

This past week I asked a cross-section of this church this question: "What do you think are Oak Hills' main obstacles to rich fellowship?" Before I share some of their answers, I want to commend those who replied, and by extension all of you. No one replied by blaming anyone else. Everyone owned their answer as a concern born out of a love for their home church, answering from the perspective of their own shortcomings here. It was humbling for me to see the humility in your replies. I believe the Lord means to use them to help us all go deeper as a fellowship this year. Here are some of those candid replies:

- **MARGIN:** *Everyone is busy. It seems once one has dealt with family, job issues, and other social interactions, there's not much left for building relationships with fellow members. And if we do squeeze in some time, it's when we're the most tired, distracted, and stressed about all the other things going on in our lives.*
- **NEED:** *We aren't really that convinced that we need each other.*
- **LIFE-STAGE SIMILARITIES:** *Being a young church, we don't have many people who are closer to the end of their lives than the beginning. Most of us are at the beginning, and together we aren't able to see the end. Without the voices of wisdom in areas of life we cannot see clearly on our own, we're likely to react in similar ways—which can mean circling the wagons. We need people on the other side of our life stage to draw us out into fellowship.*
- **LIFE-STAGE DIFFERENCES:** *A lot of people in our community and church are lonely. We feel like no one is in the same place in life we are. While we don't need sameness for friendship, we're reluctant to pursue relationships with people we think are too different to connect with. But in the church the Lord picks our friends, which is better than only having friends who are like us.*
- **SELF PRESERVATION:** *We walk through life with an inward focus: 'My life, my time, my family.' We are the multitudes that Jesus saw as harassed and helpless sheep without a shepherd <sup>(Mt 9:36)</sup> but we fail to see others as the same.*
- **INTENTIONALITY:** *Fellowship is messy and complicated. We have to be intentional with it. We're very intentional about other things—like soccer, recycling, or how we eat. Relationships tend to get whatever is left, even though they matter so much more. There is unspeakable joy in walking through life together.*

These were offered up by people whose love and investment in this church is beyond question. And I don't think any of these answers are figments of anyone's imagination. We are busy, lonely, strapped, stressed and self-sufficient. Left to ourselves, many of us would just pull back further and further until we seal ourselves up in our dank caves where we'd trade the warmth and light of the sun for a place where the temperature stays the same. I have good news today. We aren't left to ourselves. The Lord has much to say to us from His word today about this.

If you like structure, treat this sermon as two parts. The part up until now has been prelude to set your head spinning with ideas, conviction and revelation about the nature and obstacles to fellowship. Now we're going to begin a new thought which will tie in at the end. To shift gears, let us read our text.

### LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23

<sup>22</sup>*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;*

<sup>23</sup>*they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

## **A STUNNING CONFESSION**

It was our first Sunday visiting that church. Near the middle of the order of service in the bulletin we read these words: “*The Prayers of the People.*” It was essentially an open-mic free-for-all for anyone who wanted to share something God was teaching them. A man of a slight build in his late 30’s made his way to the front. Looking down, he said in a soft voice, “*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases and his mercies never come to an end.*”

He continued, “*This past Thursday night, my family and I sat down to dinner. I asked for someone to pass the peas. My daughter went to hand me the bowl, but in the exchange the peas were dropped and they went everywhere—on the floor, on the table, everywhere. I waited. If you know me, as some of you do, you know that something like those spilled peas can really ruin not only my night, but everyone else’s too. I waited. Nothing happened. No rage. No outburst. We cleaned up the peas and finished our dinner in peace. So I wanted to say today that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases and his mercies never come to an end.*” And with that, he sat down.

It was stunning. I had never seen anything like this in church before. There was nothing eloquent, strong or memorable about this man, and yet I have not forgotten what happened there. I want to talk a bit about what he said, and then about the context in which he said it in light of the verse he quoted as we discuss the kindness of God in the gift of fellowship.

## **NEW MERCIES EVERY DAY**

Fellowship suffers when we live with a fallout shelter mentality—hoarding our energy, resources and time just in case it all blows up. And I think what we often fear will explode will be our life style—which for some is marked by the flow of money, for others by their circles and types of friends, for others by their personal successes. We fiercely protect whatever it is that gives us our sense of place in this world. For Christians, we must ask ourselves what that is. Are we afraid it will fail us or run out? If we are, we will fight to protect it.

There is an ongoingness to the Lord’s provision in our lives that assures us that He has more than enough to meet our needs. But with that comes another pledge that He will not give it to us all at once. He gives us what we need when we need it. Jesus said, “*When you pray, say... ‘Give us each day our daily bread’*” (Lk 11:2-3) And the testimony of Scripture is that this is what God will faithfully do. Consider the following bits of evidence.

- “*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*” (1 Cor 10:13)
- “*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (food, clothing, shelter, time) will be added to you. So don’t be anxious about tomorrow, tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*” (Mt 6:33-34)

If we are to take God at His word here, I think we must agree with John Piper who said, “*Today’s mercies are not designed to carry tomorrow’s burdens. There will be mercies tomorrow for that. Today’s mercies are for today’s burdens. The strength to live tomorrow will be given tomorrow, not today. And it will be given. Our task today is not to have the strength needed for tomorrow’s burdens. Our task today is to live by the mercies given for today, and to believe that there will be new mercies for tomorrow. Today’s mercies do not include strength for tomorrow; they include faith that tomorrow’s unseen mercies will be sufficient for tomorrow.*”

Of course this doesn’t mean we’re to forsake wise preparations for the future. Wise preparations are quite often the burdens we’re called to carry today—careful investments with money, diligence in school, faithfulness in the small things at work as we work toward greater responsibility. But there is a difference between making wise preparations for tomorrow and trying to deal with all the unexpected, unpredictable problems of tomorrow today. You can’t do it. You weren’t meant to.

Even more, God opposes this. When we pray, “*God, load me up today for all the burdens and pain I’m going to face this year,*” what are we after? Control? Independence? Self-confidence? God doesn’t want controlling, independent self-confidence to be your strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. He has something much more wonderful and sufficient in mind for you—the steadfast love of the Lord which never ceases and His mercies which never end, but instead are new every morning. It is a mercy in itself that He calls you to a life of daily dependence upon Him, lest you forget you needed Him in the first place.

Are you trying to carry tomorrow’s burdens today? If you are, you can probably see it in your heart toward fellowship. You don’t have the desire or energy to delight in others. Celebration itself becomes a burden. Think of that man who testified. He was celebrating something real. God had dealt mercifully with him. It was just a small moment, but how God met him in it wasn’t small to him at all. He saw something we’ll miss without fail when we are trying to carry tomorrow’s burdens today. He saw today’s mercies for today’s burdens and it was so beautiful to him that he had to testify—even celebrate.

## **THE KINDNESS OF GOD**

What does this have to do with fellowship? This man was celebrating God’s kindness to him. He by no means believed he’d never explode over spilled peas again. All he knew was that on Thursday night he didn’t. And that was mercy. He had been covered by the wings of God in a time when he needed shelter and he wanted to give praise to God for it. So what did he do? He brought it into his fellowship with the church. Part of his joy was made complete in his testimony. Not only had God dealt mercifully with him and his family, God had given this man a cathartic forum for confession to say, “*Great is His faithfulness.*”

The fellowship of the saints was yet another part of God’s mercy to him, new again on that Sunday morning. Not only did the Lord stay his temper at the dinner table Thursday, but God also gave him a place to celebrate that mercy on Sunday. His confession was a mercy new to me that morning as it exposed my own coldness toward God’s sustaining grace. We all have reasons for how much or little we engage in fellowship with one another. But there is power in fellowship—sustaining power flowing daily from the confessions of praise from the people of God. Apart from fellowship, we will never hear them.

I want to close by celebrating the kindness of God in the gift of fellowship. We are not alone. He has called us into fellowship such that when we are broken, grieving or despairing, we have support. When we are rescued, blessed and sustained, others can enter in to our song of praise. Poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti said, “*The worst moment for an atheist is when he is truly thankful, but has no one to thank.*” For the Christian, not only do we have Someone to thank, we also have a place to offer thanks where we experience the “*Amen*” of the fellowship of the saints. What a kindness this is—a daily mercy! Great is His faithfulness. May God overcome our obstacles to fellowship so that we might recognize His daily mercies and celebrate them together.